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Diversity is key for our water supply

By John C. O'Neill
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How San Diego can best cope with growing concerns about our water supply is the subject of some controversy. Efforts by the city to reclaim and purify water for reuse to augment our dwindling supply continue to draw fire from various quarters. These objections are wrongheaded, ignoring science, history and economics.

More than 90 percent of San Diego County's water comes through pipes from Northern California and Arizona. Our economy, our homes and the well-being of our families all depend on a water supply that today is beyond our control. We must pay whatever price is set for us by others. And we can only take as much water as we are allotted.

Meanwhile, environmental problems in the Sacramento Delta and related judicial decisions have reduced water available from that source. Without a major act of Congress or a biological miracle, there seems little chance that water from the north will increase anytime soon.

Imported water is more expensive for San Diego County than for our neighbors to the north. A transportation charge is added based on how far the water must travel. In our case, water travels more than 400 miles from the Sacramento Delta to our local water systems. So whatever we pay to import water increases our cost of living.

Our dependence on imported water cannot be corrected by drilling wells. There is no usable water beneath the ground in San Diego. And we cannot dam the flow of rivers, because we have none. So we have limited options:

Hope. We can hope the mountain snow pack improves. We can hope that water from the Sacramento Delta becomes more available despite regulatory challenges. Hopefully.

Hope, Part II. We can hope nothing ever happens to disrupt either of the massive canal projects that connect us to Arizona or Sacramento. Since major geologic faults traverse both of these areas, scientists say it is only a matter of time before an earthquake will threaten one or both of these routes.

Conservation. We can – and we must – view water conservation as the least expensive and most responsible way to respond to the water crisis that is already upon us. In Monterey County, residents and businesses have reduced water consumption by nearly 40 percent in the past decade – because they must. With discipline and leadership, we can do the same.

Desalination. Converting ocean water to drinking water is widely used around the world in climates similar to our own. As technology gets smarter, the cost of desalination has decreased. And without some Rube Goldberg alternative like hauling icebergs down from Alaska, it is one of the few viable strategies for creating a new drinking water supply.

Reuse. Orange County has already successfully implemented a reuse system. At \$476 per acre-foot, Orange County has produced a much cheaper and drought-resistance source of water.

San Diego already reuses water that flows from dozens of municipal disposal systems and runoff from thousands of farms and ranches into the Colorado River. People who consider potable water reuse objectionable because of the “yuck factor” have closed their eyes to the reality of where our water has already been before we purify it and send it to our homes and hospitals.

A startup program to augment our local reservoirs with reused water has been approved by the San Diego City Council. The recycled water that will augment supplies in San Vicente Reservoir will be fully drinkable at the point it enters the system – and cleaner than the water already in the reservoir.

Water recycling is part of the solution, but certainly not the only approach San Diego should pursue. We should encourage more use of existing “purple pipe” water that is suitable for commercial landscaping and some industrial uses, but does not meet drinking water standards. However, simply building more miles of a water system that cannot be used by residents, restaurants or others misses the target.

San Diego's water recycling pilot project will produce about 365 million gallons of fresh water per year. It will be paid for through our water rates and from government grants. The costs for this pilot program are a wise investment. Recycling water offers the promise of greater local control and can help offset future costs of importing water.

A wit once wrote, “Nowadays people know the price of everything and the value of nothing.” Whatever price we pay today to increase our water supply that San Diegans can control is a valuable investment for our future. And that is more than mere hope; it is a strategy for success.